

Can Churches Be Too Churchy?

What is a church? I don't mean as a denomination, or as a theological entity. I mean in terms of the *local* church: the St. Somebody's that's in the town, or village, or just down the street.

What is it?



It's a place of worship, for sure (one hopes). For many it's where the milestones of life – births, marriages, deaths – are marked and solemnified. And, of course, it's not just a building but a community which provides fellowship, companionship, and belonging.

But all of this only speaks to one aspect of the local church.

In technical terms, this is the church as a *modality*: the universal church expressed in a local mode. Each particular geographical place is cared for by one local expression of the one church. It's why we think of "parishes" and why even non-established denominations still have local congregations with the name of the town in their own name.

But there is another aspect of church. In technical terms, it is the church as a *sodality*. This aspect reflects more of the sense of a church as a *movement*. The word itself comes from the latin *sodalis* meaning "comrade" and so portrays a group of people moving with common purpose. When we think of things such as monastic orders and mission agencies we are thinking of sodalities.

There has often been tension between the two: from historic power plays between monasteries and local bishops, through to a local pastor bemoaning yet another appeal for energy and resources from a parachurch organisation.

But my reflection here is about this: our churches are too churchy. The *modal* aspect has become the overwhelming characteristic; we need to learn to act more like sodalities, like *movements*, like purposeful communities.

To be sure, there are many blessings in modal ministry. At its best the church acts truly as the community's chaplain.

It is a steady presence, available in season and out of it.

It is a refuge for people with busy lives. It's a place where the solace of word and sacrament are regularly offered for regular folk. It is a provider of pastoral care, particularly for those who would otherwise be forgotten.

In this, those who serve the church (in everything from flowers to singing) can rightly see themselves as also serving the community in which the church exists.

But the purely modal church has missed something major: the church's task is not simply to *serve* the world, but also to *change* the world. There have always been those who have caught a vision for some sort of renewed mission, evangelism, or social activism. And many times they have found the local church unwilling or unable to embrace this form of movement, and they have formed a parachurch organisation.

A consequent phenomenon is the "hidden" mission of volunteerism. Christians are by and large excellent volunteers, devoting resources and energy to worthy causes.

They will give time and energy to the church in its modal chaplaincy mode. And they will also give much time and energy to "sodalities": other charities, agencies, and programmes that bless and build the wider community. This is excellent in so many ways! But it does mean that the various forms of activism are *divorced* from church life; they are merely competing opportunities to serve. A volunteer can serve the church, or they can seek to change and bless the world by volunteering with other groups; the two don't go together. I have known a congregation where a significant section of the membership was doing wonderful good works together through

another organisation but this common movement was simply not a factor in how they worshipped and shared in fellowship. The church simply did not matter for that part of their lives.

These days it is further amplified. As the church's chaplaincy role in society wanes, so service to the church begins to feel more and more like self-serving. Anecdotally, there is an increasing number of those who are "done" with church. They want to serve the Christian community, but towards an *end*. Without that missional movement, the church seems self-referential. Things like, "we were just playing at church," "we were talking the talk but not walking the walk", "devoted to Sundays and nothing else", "we just never *did* anything", "a nice friendly church that in the end was an inch deep" is the sort of language that gets used. It is usually a justifiable critique.

The reflection is simple: a local church must recapture a sense of "sodality", not content to simply just *be* in the place, but to be an *active movement*. Collectively, a church must be seeking to answer the question of how it is being called to engage, confront, and improve the world. It must therefore not just offer solace, but also good and godly *provocation*. It must be more than a place of solidity, but a generator of *instability*, of discontent with the status quo, providing the tools, language, and opportunities to push ahead down gospel-shaped paths. The church needs to not just be a worthy end of charitable acts (amongst many) but an effective *means* for them. We must be a movement, shedding our churchiness so that we can truly be the church of God.